Book club in a Bag

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Reading Group Guide

Spotlight on:
The Time Traveler's Wife

Author: Audrey Niffenegger

"Inquisitiveness and Desire"

Name: Audrey Niffenegger
Born: June 13, 1963 in South Haven, Michigan

It's hard to convey the experience of making art to someone who doesn't. "Where do you get your ideas?" is the question writers hear most often. Well, where do ideas come from? Mine tend to plop down out of nowhere. One minute I'm wondering where I left my keys, the next minute I'm thinking about a little girl named Lizzie whose face is covered with soft black fur. She wasn't in my head the minute before; where did she come from? Some enormous waiting room, perhaps, full of ideas. I imagine Lizzie waiting patiently, holding a little ticket with a number on it, listening for her number. Maybe she's been waiting there for years. Now it's her turn, and she gets up, ready to jump into my head, hoping for the best.

I believe that we attune ourselves to receive certain kinds of ideas. It's unlikely, for example, that I would pay any attention to an idea about a young widowed farm woman trying to keep her land from being sucked up by agribusiness. Even if I thought of her (and, of course, I just did) I wouldn't bother with her; she's not mine to use, I don't know her story, and I don't care to know it. I want little, furry Lizzie. The farm widow belongs to someone else, she just wandered into my head by accident to illustrate this point. We all have ideas all the time. But we only pay attention to a few. I'm interested in strangeness, and so my chosen ideas are... strange.

I am both a visual artist and a writer. I don't make too many distinctions between the two. I have made portraits of myself as Siamese twins, as Medusa, as a vampire. I'm interested in mutants, love, death, amputation, sex, and time (the themes of my novel, *The Time Traveler's Wife*). Symmetry, cemeteries, translation, and superstition are the obsessions of the novel I am writing at the moment, but all of these concerns appear and reappear in my visual art. When you are fishing for ideas you tend to catch the kind you have baited your hook for, and you throw back all the others.

In the movies, writers are always balling up pieces of paper and staring moodily into the corner as though they were struggling to read a teleprompter. Sheesh. Writing is a completely internal activity. Watching someone write is pointless. Reading is where all the action is. You are moving your mind across someone else's, like a snail, like a long kiss.

A while back my boyfriend and I went to see *Sylvia,* the rather overwrought movie about the marriage of Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes. We happened to see it in London, where much of the movie takes place, and the dank flats and overcast skies of the movie seemed extra real, completely correct. But the actors in the movie were pretending to be writers. There was a great deal of furious discussion of writing, jealous rants and drunken recriminations. There was a lot of staring into space while seated in front of vintage typewriters. And of course there was the obligatory scene of Sylvia Plath sealing the kitchen with tape prior to putting her head in the oven.

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"Inquisitiveness and Desire" (Continued)

That's attractive, I thought, munching Pringles. (English movie theatres sell the oddest foods in their concessions stands.) Yet another movie reinforces the art = pain connection. Yawn.

My own experience has been that it's not pain that makes art. If art were simply a response to pain, there would be a lot more art. I think that art is the result of inquisitiveness, mingled with a deep desire to make things be. In 1997 I was sitting at my drawing table when a phrase popped into my head: *The Time Traveler's Wife*. I wrote it down on the sheet of Kraft paper that covered the table, along with all the other ideas and song titles and lists of Things to Do. It was a generous phrase. It assured me that there were two characters, a husband and a wife, and that the husband was a time traveler. I started to think about the wife. It would be hard to be the wife, I thought; you'd spend a lot of time waiting for your man, and he would be the one having all the adventures. I felt sorry for her; I could see her, sitting at a table, drinking tea, waiting. Why does he leave her alone? I wondered. Another idea plopped down: time travel is a disease, it's a genetic disorder. By now this little cluster of ideas had my full attention. I wasn't interested in anything else now, and I began to build and ponder and worry them into being. Their names are Clare and Henry. She has red hair. His mother died in a car crash. He visits Clare when she's a child. She makes art about birds. My curiosity was riveted: I had to find out the story, and to find out, I wrote.

The delightful part about making anything is that no story or picture is ever complete. When I am reading, I add things to the story that were never put there by the writer. When you read my writing, you have your own vision of each character, and your own understanding of their motives and desires. If I could put my eye to your brain I would hardly recognize my world, it is a collaboration between the two of us. You have your own supply of ideas, which my writing is calling forth. Even Lizzie, the seven-year-old girl covered with chinchilla-like fur and wearing a dirty white lace dress, who is now wandering aimlessly around a hotel room in my head and talking to her stuffed rabbit, has a certain solidity for you that she didn't a few paragraphs ago. Excuse me; she needs my attention. Thank you for yours.

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On the novel's first page Clare declares, "I wait for Henry." In what way does this define her character, and how is the theme of waiting developed throughout the book?

Just as Clare is defined by her waiting, so Henry is defined by his unpredictable comings and goings. That—along with his hard drinking and proclivities for stealing and beating people up—might be described as stereotypically masculine behavior, just as waiting might be called stereotypically feminine. What keeps these characters from being stereotypes? In what ways does the author give them depth and nuance? For example, at what points in the book do Henry and Clare reverse roles?

Niffenegger portrays Henry's time traveling as the result of a genetic disorder, which is explained at some length later on. How plausible is this explanation—not from a scientific point of view, but from a dramatic or literary one? Do you think that Henry's condition requires an explanation?

How has Henry's personality been shaped by his bouts of chrono-displacement? How does his time traveling affect Clare? In addition, how is Clare affected by meeting her future husband when she is six and seeing him repeatedly throughout her childhood and adolescence before they become lovers? How does the author manage to make their relationship seem eccentric—and even enchanted—rather than sinister?

What is the particular significance of Henry's job as a librarian? What connection do you see between his choice of career and his childhood fascination with the Field Museum (pp. 27-36)?

Along with his frequent trips backward and forward in time, the critical event in Henry's early life is the hideous death of his mother, which he witnesses as a child and revisits compulsively as an adult (pp. 110-14). How has this event helped shape him and how does it foreshadow other events in the novel?

How does the author manage her novel's fantastically intricate time scheme? For example, where in her narrative does she relate the same incident from different perspectives in order to supply missing information? How does she foreshadow such developments as Ingrid Carmichel's suicide, the birth of Alba DeTamble, and Henry's death?

Among the curiosities of the book is the way chrono-displacement occasionally causes its protagonists to split and double. At the age of nine Henry is taught pickpocketing by his twenty-seven-year-old self (pp. 50-6); Henry returns to his thirty-three-year-old wife after making love to her on her eighteenth birthday (pp. 402-414). After Henry has a vasectomy at the age of thirty-seven, Clare becomes pregnant by a thirty-three-year-old "surrogate" (pp. 363-5). How do Henry and Clare view their younger and older selves? Why, for one thing, aren't they ever jealous of them? And what are this novel's implications about the relationship between time and the self?

In theory Henry's time traveling should make him omniscient—at least as far as his own timeline is concerned—but Clare knows things about him that he does not. What accounts for this? What role does the characters' knowledge—and the gaps in their knowledge—play in the novel?

Discussion Questions (Continued):

Closely related to the theme of foreknowledge is the idea of free will. Does Henry's chrono-instability give him a freedom that Clare lacks, or does it make him more powerless? Discuss Henry's observation that "there is only free will when you are in time, in the present" (p. 58).

When Henry asks her to describe her artwork, Clare tells him that it's about birds and longing (p. 15). How do the themes of birds—along with wings and flight—and longing figure elsewhere in this book?

What is the List that Henry makes for Clare, and how does it give the book dramatic momentum? Does Niffenegger employ other devices to similar effect? One of the things that makes a story suspenseful is the reader's sense that events are reaching a climax, that time is running out. How is Niffenegger able to impart this sense to her readers, given Henry's seemingly inexhaustible supply of time?

Both Gomez and Celia warn Clare about Henry. "This guy would chew you up and spit you out . . . He's not at all what you need," says Gomez (p. 420). Can we simply chalk those warnings down to jealousy, or might the observers be correct? Is Henry more ruthless and amoral than he appears to Clare? How do you interpret Henry's statement: "I'm not exactly the man she's known from earliest childhood. I'm a close approximation she is guiding surreptitiously toward a me that exists in her mind's eye" (p. 149)?

How does Henry and Clare's relationship change following their marriage? How is it affected by their desire for a child?

Would you call *The Time Traveler's Wife* a comedy or a tragedy, or are such classifications relevant to a work that plays havoc with time and allows one character to appear periodically after his death?

How does the author use time travel as a metaphor: for love, for loss and absence, for fate, for aging, for death? To what extent are Clare and Henry a "normal" couple?

Book: The Time Traveler's Wife

NoveList Book Discussion Guide:

Author:

Henry and Clare's love story was inspired by the marriage of Audrey Niffenegger's grandparents, Elizabeth and Norbert Tamandl, to whom *The Time Traveler's Wife* is dedicated. The Tamandls' happy marriage was cut short when Norbert died tragically young of a brain tumor. "One day he had a headache and three days later he was dead," says Niffenegger. "So it was this idea that you can't depend on people to be there, that you can't predict anything" (http://www.bookslut.com/features/2003_12_001158.php). Niffenegger never met her grandfather, but she wanted to write about the kind of relationship she imagined her grandparents must have had, "a perfect marriage that is tested by something outside the control of the couple" (http://www.bookbrowse.com/index.cfm?page=author&authorID=928). If Clare's waiting for Henry resembles Elizabeth Tamandl's patient endurance, Clare also waits in the much more prosaic fashion that Niffenegger's mother did, running the household while her husband, a civil engineer, traveled as much as four days a week for his work.

Audrey Niffenegger grew up in Evanston, Illinois, a suburb just north of Chicago; she has lived in or near Chicago her entire life. Her love for the city and its environs is evident in the carefully described settings of her novel, which she used, she has said, to give the novel a "documentary" tone in an effort to balance the "fantastical" premise of the story she is telling (http://www.bookslut.com/features/2003_12_001158.php). Most of the places described in *The Time Traveler's Wife* actually exist and can be visited, including the Newberry Library, the Aragon Ballroom, Bookman's Alley, Vintage Vinyl, and, of course, the Field Museum.

Niffenegger is also a visual artist; examples of her haunting work, some of which evokes themes that will be familiar to readers of *The Time Traveler's Wife*, can be viewed online at http://www.printworkschicago.com/artists/niffen/niffen.htm. She earned a BFA from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago in 1985 and an MFA from Northwestern University in 1991. She is currently a professor of Book Arts at the Columbia College Chicago Center for Book and Paper Arts, which she helped found, teaching graduate courses in fine edition book production and letterpress printing.

Summary:

The Time Traveler's Wife is either "a soaring celebration of the victory of love over time," as a review in the *Chicago Tribune* describes it, or it is a love story more mired in time than any other. Clare and Henry meet when she is twenty and he is twenty-eight. For Henry, it is their first meeting; Clare has known Henry since she was six and he was thirty-six. Their life together will be shaped by these paradoxes, generated by Henry's uncontrollable, spontaneous time traveling.

Henry's first time traveling experience occurs on his fifth birthday. It is a perfect day, highlighted by a visit to the Field Museum with his parents, and at its end, he is too wound up to sleep. He is sitting by the window, long after his parents have gone to bed, "trying to feel sleepy" (p. 26), when he finds himself back in the museum. He meets a man there, another time traveler, who shows him around the museum and begins to teach him the survival skills every time traveler needs, especially travelers—like Henry—who can bring nothing with them, and so appear in unpredictable places completely nude with no idea how long they will have to survive in that time and place. Young Henry meets this man again and again in his travels; from him, he learns how to pick pockets and steal clothes, how to break and enter, and how to fight. He does not recognize the older man as another version of himself until he is nine; the realization that he is truly the only time traveler overwhelms him with loneliness.

NoveList Reading Group Guide: (Continued)

Henry's travels are instigated by emotional stress and influenced by a kind of emotional gravitational field; he returns to those moments and those people that are important to him. He haunts the early years of his parents' marriage and his own childhood and youth. He witnesses again and again the bizarre car accident that kills his mother on the Christmas Eve of his sixth year, an accident Henry himself survives only because he time travels (only the second time he has done so) at a critical moment. Once he meets and marries Clare, he visits her childhood repeatedly.

Henry begins appearing in the Meadow near Clare's home when she is six. He gives her a list of dates on which he knows he will be in the Meadow and they have a series of encounters throughout her childhood. As Clare becomes a young woman, the relationship becomes more charged, and Henry struggles with feeling "Humbert Humbertish" (p. 421), a discomfort exacerbated by Clare's repeated attempts to seduce him. Finally, on Clare's eighteenth birthday, forty-one-year-old Henry visits her as a time traveler for the last time. They both know that, in the proper chronological sequence, they will meet in two years, but they will not see each other again before that. He and Clare make love; it is her first time.

Only once does Henry appear in the Meadow on a date that is not on the list. One October morning in 1984, the year she is thirteen, Clare awakes to hear someone screaming her name. She runs out to the Meadow, where she sees her father and her brother, obviously on a hunting expedition, staring at a bloody spot on the ground. She is frightened until she spots Henry hiding nearby, signaling that he is all right, and she allows her father to usher her back to bed.

Henry and Clare meet on schedule in the Newberry Library, where he works and she is doing research for an art school project. They date and fall passionately in love; on Clare's twenty-first birthday, they are engaged. In spite of a frantic, and nearly fatal, search for a drug that will keep him in the present, Henry time travels on the wedding day, and Clare says her vows to an older Henry. Twenty-nine-year-old Henry marries Clare in a civil ceremony in Chicago the next week and they settle into married life.

As his travels become more difficult, Henry seeks out yet another doctor, the last in a long line, and manages to convince the skeptical scientist—primarily by disappearing and reappearing in front of him—that he is neither lying nor delusional. As Dr. Kendrick begins the search for the source of Henry's affliction, Clare and Henry decide, despite Henry's fears about the consequences of passing on his peculiar defect, to have a child. Clare becomes pregnant quickly, but miscarries.

After the fifth miscarriage, Henry suggests that they adopt, but Clare resists the idea. She is tired of "pretend[ing] to be normal people, having normal lives," she says, and an adoption would be more pretending (p. 349-50). After a wrenching argument, Henry schedules a vasectomy without telling Clare. His plan is thwarted by an inconvenient time-traveling episode, but Clare has guessed what he is doing. Tired of the fight, and secure in the knowledge, imparted by an older, time-traveling Henry, that there will be a baby, she tells him to go get his vasectomy. Relieved at having resolved their marital difficulties, they make love; four weeks later, Henry gets a vasectomy and Clare discovers she is pregnant. Three months later, she miscarries that baby, too.

A younger Henry, time traveling into the future, makes love to Clare and she becomes pregnant again. With new information from Dr. Kendrick's genetic research, Clare manages to carry the baby to term and a daughter, Alba, is born. Late in the pregnancy, Henry time travels into the future—a relatively rare occurrence—and meets a beautiful, self-possessed ten-year-old girl, his daughter. He is dead, he finds out, although, in Alba's words, "not continuously dead" (p. 387). Like her father, she is a time traveler, and the condition has acquired a name: Alba is a "Chronologically Displaced Person."

NoveList Reading Group Guide: (Continued)

As Henry turns forty-three, the year Alba is five and Clare is thirty-five, events begin to accelerate. He visits that October morning in 1984 and realizes he is seeing his own death; the blood on the grass will be left by another version of himself. He begins to prepare Clare for the death he knows is coming. Later in the year, he time travels to the previous January, arriving naked and unprotected in the dead of Chicago winter; help cannot reach him soon enough and he returns to his own time hypothermic and frostbitten. He loses both feet to frostbite. Though he is still struggling with depression and pain, Henry suggests they have a New Year's Eve party, and Clare invites all of the people who have been important in their lives. In the midst of the party, Henry disappears, returning to the fatal October morning. He reappears, shot, and dies surrounded by Clare, Alba and all their friends. Though Henry and Alba see each other a number of times in the course of their time travels, Clare does not see him again until he visits her one last time when she is eighty-two.

Questions:

While answers are provided, there is no presumption that you have been given the last word. Readers bring their own personalities to the books that they are examining. What is obvious and compelling to one reader may be invisible to the next. The questions that have been selected provide one reasonable access to the text; the answers are intended to give you examples of what a reflective reader might think. The variety of possible answers is one of the reasons we find book discussions such a rewarding activity.

The Time Traveler's Wife was first conceived as a love story. How is it similar to other love stories? How is it different?

In many ways, *The Time Traveler's Wife* is a typical love story. Henry and Clare meet, fall in love, marry, have a child. They build a life together around mutual friends, shared experiences, and the private moments and inside jokes that structure every couple's intimate world. The obstacles to their relationship are often those faced by any other couple: the complications of less-than-perfect families, the jealousies of previous lovers. On this level, in fact, Henry and Clare's life together is nearly too perfect; while they struggle with infertility, they rarely disagree about anything else. Indeed, they frequently ignore issues that, it seems, should loom large in any relationship. Henry is troubled by Gomez's love for Clare, but never questions Clare's loyalty to him or acts to disrupt the friendship between Gomez and Clare; Clare is disturbed when she is confronted by Henry's casual violence, but she never questions his moral code.

Even Henry's time traveling can be read in this context as another of the obstacles authors throw in the way of their star-crossed lovers. Clare and Henry wait for his inevitable end, just as they would if he had cancer or AIDS or any of the other slow killers that plague human beings. Niffenegger encourages this analogy by accelerating the pace and violence of Henry's travels—as the pace of a cancer patient's decline will accelerate as death approaches—and by making Henry's uncontrollable travels the result of a genetic abnormality that Dr. Kendrick can pinpoint and attempt to treat. Though it has peculiar metaphysical implications, Henry's affliction is above all a medical problem.

Similarly, Clare's fate, as the one who waits at home, is that of any woman married to a wanderer. She waits, as Odysseus's Penelope waited, as sailors' and soldiers' wives have waited through the ages, aware of those who have waited before her: "Long ago, men went to sea, and women waited for them, standing on the edge of the water, scanning the horizon for the tiny ship. Now I wait for Henry" (p. vii). She cannot know what Henry is doing or where (or when) he is at any particular moment; Henry's sudden departures and uncertain returns are a part of the rhythm of her life.

NoveList Reading Group Guide: (Continued)

But Henry's particular kind of traveling shapes the relationship and its story in important ways. The waiting of the sailor's wife begins with her marriage and ends with news of her husband's death; knowing he will not return, she can try to stop looking out to sea, settle into a new life not governed by tides and shipping news. Clare's waiting never ends, even when Henry is dead, because he is, as Alba says, "not continuously dead" (p. 387). Iterations of his younger self, traveling in the future, reappear in her life at odd, unexpected intervals. Though he does not visit Clare, Alba sees him with some frequency; the knowledge that her daughter has what she cannot tears at Clare: "I never see him," she tells Charisse:

> I try to keep my voice light, as though I am not tortured by the unfairness of this, as though I don't mourn my resentment when Alba tells me about her visits with Henry even as I drink up every detail.
>
> Why not me, Henry? [. . .] Why only Alba? (p. 527).

She is held, too, by the certain knowledge, left her by Henry himself, that she will have one last visit from him. She is, at eighty-two, nearly fifty years after his death, still waiting for Henry (p. 536).

Clare's waiting begins earlier, too. She waits for each of the dates on the list Henry gives her; she waits on the designated days for Henry to appear. These visits punctuate her childhood; a larger waiting shapes her adolescence. Knowing that she and Henry will fall in love, and that Henry will be her husband, she does not date or engage in the experimentation typical of adolescence. Trapped in the chronological world, she waits to meet him in the natural order of things, waits to grow up, waits for her destiny. Nor is that waiting finished when they meet; the Henry she encounters in the Newberry Library is not the Henry she knows. As he tells her during their first date in real time, "the person you know doesn't exist yet. Stick with me, and sooner or later, he's bound to appear. That's the best I can do, though" (p. 20). Even within the marriage, Clare waits for Henry to become the man she remembers from her childhood in the Meadow.

How do Henry's and Clare's relationships with their mothers reflect the larger themes of this book?

Henry and Clare are both shaped by the absence of their mothers, by an aching emptiness in the one place every child looks for a comforting presence. Absence is a kind of presence in this book, "like a damaged nerve, like a dark bird" (p. 520); Clare's life, shaped around the need to wait for Henry, circulates around the various absences of her time-traveling husband, of the six children she miscarries, of her one time-traveling daughter. She has lived, as Henry says, "a life of suspended animation" (p. 519); meeting Henry so young, knowing they are fated to marry, she experiences her life as an adolescent and young adult as preparation for Henry, marking time until they meet in proper chronological order. As he faces his own death, Henry fears more than anything else that Clare will, like his father, crumble before his final, irrevocable absence, will be unable to "live, fully, present in the world, which is so beautiful" (p. 521). His absence, he hopes, will give Clare a presence in the world she has missed, in her waiting. At the same time, his promise in his last letter to her that he will visit her again is a cruel gift, condemning her to wait yet more even as it offers a hope on which she can continue to live.

Henry's life is marked by the moment of his mother's death, his time traveling pulling him again and again to the scene of the accident. Most trauma victims live to some extent in the past, coping with survivor's guilt and the certainty that they could or should have done something differently. Henry is condemned to relive the defining event of his childhood literally; again and again, he watches as the accident happens, helps in the aftermath, pages his father to come to the hospital. The accident also tears his father away from him; Richard DeTamble is too mired in his own grief to reach out to his lonely, grieving son.

NoveList Reading Group Guide: (Continued)

At the same time, though, Henry's time traveling allows him to know his mother in a way he could not otherwise. As he tells his father, "[s]ometimes time travel is a great thing. I needed to see her and sometimes I get to see her" (p. 226). His travels give him the chance to see her as a happy young wife and mother, a singer on the verge of stardom, a beautiful woman: "I see her walking around the neighborhood, with you, with me. She goes to the park and learns scores, she shops, she has coffee with Mara at Tia's. I see her with Uncle Ish. I see her at Juilliard. I hear her sing!" (p. 226). It is these images, the reader senses, that provide him a model for his relationship with Clare, to whom he gives his mother's engagement and wedding rings.

Clare's mother is living for much of the book, but she is locked in herself, trapped in mental illness and alcoholism, unable to escape the walls of her own anguish to reach out to her children. She writes beautifully expressive poems that no one is allowed to read; the children's experiences of her center on her sharp tongue when she is drinking and the need for quiet when she is sunk in depression. Clare's reaction to finding out, through Henry's slip of the tongue, that her mother has died in his present is telling: "'She killed herself.' I am flooded with certainty. It is the thing I have always feared most" (p. 82). While Etta and Nell, the housekeepers, can provide some motherly nurturing, the weight of Lucille's almost-presence in the house is crushing. The children fear her and fear for her, protect her and try to protect themselves from her, but they cannot escape the knowledge that she is their mother, with all that means for their present and future. Lucille's death, of ovarian cancer, only concentrates the absence. Where Henry remembers his mother's love as unquestionable, unwavering, "Lucille was changeable as the wind," leaving Clare with no anchor in this uncharted emotional sea (p. 342). Clare is only able to grieve for her mother when, months after Lucille's death, she finds a poem Lucille wrote for her. The poem is "evidence, immutable, undeniable, a snapshot of an emotion" (p. 342), an emotion Lucille could not give her children in life, however badly they needed it. That emotional absence is, in its way, more devastating even than Henry's physical loss of his mother.

What does this novel suggest about the nature of identity in relation to time?

The connection between chronology and identity is, for Henry and Clare, the most pressing of the many paradoxes implicit in time travel. Identity is formed by experience and growth, both usually functions of chronological time. Becoming—developing a sure sense of self and a stable identity—is the primary goal of what we call "growing up." Predictably, Clare is most sensitive to this connection, and most bothered by Henry's position outside of the normal order, as she enters adolescence. When thirty-five-year-old Henry, visiting thirteen-year-old Clare, mentions that adult Clare will like her coffee with cream and sugar, Clare complains, "You're making me into a freak" (p.74). She fears that, by telling her what she will like, Henry is short-circuiting the process of trial and error that will reveal herself to herself: "I mean, how am I going to figure out if that's what I like or if I just like it because you tell me I like it?" (p. 74). Henry turns the question into a discussion of the possibility of free will, but Clare cannot let the point go. "You are making me different," she says when Henry is finished talking (p. 78). And Henry, seeing "Clare, my wife, superimposed on the face of this young girl," acknowledges the truth of her accusation (p. 78). Not openly discussed by Henry or Clare, but equally at issue, is Clare's self-imposed chastity in high school and college; knowing she will marry Henry, she never dates, the secret of Henry's presence in her life setting her apart even from her closest friends. She does not form her own ideas about a marriageable partner, but receives Henry's image as her goal.

Clare will have a similar, though more subtle, effect on Henry when they finally meet in real time. Partly, this is the normal influence of being in a relationship. Henry responds to Clare's presence in his life as any person responds to a lover, growing and changing through the experience of their togetherness. The effect is more complex, though, with the repercussions of Henry's time traveling layered with the normal dynamics of forming a couple. We all carry an image of the ideal partner, and we all seek to make the partner we eventually choose fit that image, if only in minor ways. Clare's image is of an actual man, the man she knows Henry will be. She

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literally remembers the man Henry has not yet become; "[. . .] you're not you yet," she tells Henry when they are dating (p. 160). He is, rather, "a close approximation she is guiding surreptitiously toward a [Henry] that exists in her mind's eye" (pp. 152-3). If young Clare is shaped by an older Henry, Henry is made into that man by adult Clare's presence in his life.

Hence, Henry's identity, like his death, is not continuous. Twenty-seven-year-old Henry tells his nine-year-old self, "We are the same" (p. 54), but twenty-eight-year-old Henry looks at his visiting thirty-three-year-old self, and envies him: "He is me, but I'm not him yet" (p. 152). When he meets Clare in real time, he tells her that "the person you know doesn't exist yet. Stick with me, and sooner or later, he's bound to appear. That's the best I can do, though" (p. 20). The question acquires practical significance when Henry time travels on his wedding day, replaced at the altar by an older iteration of himself. Disturbed by the implications of that replacement, Henry and Clare marry again in a civil ceremony the week after the wedding. Clare wonders if she is a bigamist, married to two men. When Gomez asks, "Are you the same person?" Henry replies, "Yes, but more so" (p. 280). For Clare, living with Henry is "like being with somebody who has amnesia," the experience only half-real until they have both been through it (p. 215). For her, as for Henry himself, Henry is not fully Henry yet.

How and why is Henry's potential power as a time traveler limited?

Our lives are shaped by the same basic, inescapable relationship between cause and effect that forms the basis for plotting a novel. Each decision leads to a set of consequences—calling for a new set of decisions—that we, like the characters in a novel, have no choice but to live through. Henry, as a time traveler, would seem to have the power to escape the bounds of cause and effect. He could, theoretically, reshape his present by nudging events in the past in a new direction. That potential is threatening metaphysically, as it introduces philosophical questions about the existence of alternative timelines and raises the specter of a kind of temporal chaos, and artistically, as it undermines the sense of accelerating inevitability that gives a well-plotted novel its urgency and keeps us reading.

Henry's traveling is limited in important ways, though. Most obviously, his excursions are completely spontaneous and out of his control. Though his travels seem to be influenced by the emotional weight of a particular person or event, he cannot consciously choose where or when to visit; his ability to change a particular event in his past or someone else's is completely dependent on chance. Further, he arrives at his destination completely naked, sometimes physically debilitated. The logistics of clothing and feeding himself frequently absorb all of his attention; he simply does not have the resources, physical or emotional, to influence the past while he is there.

Paradoxically, in the vision of the universe Niffenegger proposes in the novel, Henry's time traveling actually limits his freedom. It is literally impossible for him to "live in the moment," as he can be swept out of that moment without warning. More seriously, in the debate between free will and determinism, outlined in Henry's conversation with thirteen-year-old Clare (pp. 74-77), Henry balances precariously in the middle. He chooses to behave as though human choices matter and human beings have some responsibility, because "if you don't, things are bad. Depressing." But, "there is only free will when you are in time, in the present" (p. 57). He can only act to encourage what has already happened: "I can only do things that work toward what has already happened. [. . .] it's now an unalterable fact of the history of the universe and I can't do a thing about it" (p. 75). More succinctly, as he tells Gomez, "[c]ausation only runs forward" (p. 145). As a result, Henry is less free than the average person because he knows what must happen: "If you know things . . . I feel trapped, most of the time. If you are in time, not knowing . . . you're free" (p. 145). Not knowing sustains the illusion that our choices make a difference, that our causes create the effects. Henry knows otherwise; he can give Clare the list of dates he knows they met; he can bring back the information that lets them buy the house he knows they already live in. He cannot save his mother, the little girl at the hockey game (p. 56), or even himself.

NoveList Reading Group Guide: (Continued)

The inevitability of Henry's own death is accentuated by the appearance of the scene three times in the novel, once from thirteen-year-old Clare's point of view, as it happens in real time (pp. 79-80), once as Henry, time traveling, watches the death of his older self (pp. 468-69), and finally, at the moment it actually happens when Henry is forty-three (pp. 515-16). He cannot stop time and he cannot avoid his own death. His death is a mirror image of the trauma that defines much of his life: he time travels into the path of the bullet that kills him just as he spontaneously traveled out of the path of the metal scrap that killed his mother.

Clare, with the sense of the future given her by Henry, is trapped by his sense of determinism. Those who live within the flow of sequential time have at least the illusion of free will. Clare knows what her future will be and she cannot escape it, even should she want to. "I've seen my future," she tells Gomez; "I can't change it, and I wouldn't if I could" (p. 149). She tries once to escape destiny, writing the date on a drawing Henry tells her is not dated in his present. In the end, though, she is unsettled by the thought that her small act of defiance might change something vital, might even lead somehow to their not meeting as they were destined to. She trims the date from the page. In Henry's present, they laugh about their inexplicable anxiety, but Henry cannot escape an impression that "something impossible almost happened" (p. 107).

Henry is also limited in the same ways that all of us are. He cannot remember something until he has experienced it, though it may have happened years before in real time. Hence, when he and Clare first meet in Chicago, he is at a decided disadvantage. She has known him since she was six, but she is a stranger to him; he will be thirty-five when he first travels to her childhood. He will not experience those visits in the same order Clare did either, leading to a piecemeal accumulation of knowledge and experience. His visits to Clare's childhood are analogous to the way most of us share our histories with those who come into our lives as adults, in episodes and stories rather than as a single continuous narrative. As a result, in many ways, Clare knows Henry far better than he knows either her or himself.

Is Henry exactly what Clare thinks he is?

Clare sees Henry as something "like an angel" (p. 149); her grandmother is certain that he is a demon. To Clare's assertion that "a real demon would be sort of—demonic," her grandmother replies, "I think he would be nice as pie if he wanted to be" (p. 127). That observation echoes eerily in Gomez's assertion that Henry is a "charming sociopath" (p. 149). "Chaos attends his every move," Gomez says on another occasion (p. 436). For Celia, the best friend of Henry's unstable ex-girlfriend Ingrid, Henry is simply "bad news [. . .] and you be a fool to mess with him" (p. 159).

Henry's time traveling endows him with a seemingly supernatural power that encourages such judgments. A coworker, on discovering Henry's condition, remarks that it's "like working with Clark Kent" (p. 463). Nor are all of these sources entirely reliable where Henry is concerned. Clare's grandmother is nearly blind and perhaps a bit senile. Celia and Clare come to share an uneasy friendship, but at the moment she confronts Clare, she is comforting Ingrid. Gomez nurses an intense, unrequited love for Clare that will haunt his marriage to Clare's friend Charisse.

Still, there is something disturbing about Henry, a casual amorality that he attributes to the difficult facts of his condition. He has learned that he must sometimes do difficult things to survive and has developed an ethical sense that can accommodate that necessity: "So in order to cope, I pick locks, shoplift, pick pockets, mug people, panhandle, break and enter, steal cars, lie, fold, spindle, and mutilate. You name it, I've done it" (p. 143). Arriving in an unknown place and time, naked and disoriented, with no idea how long he will remain, he must be prepared to defend himself and to acquire clothing, food, and shelter. In an interesting manifestation of the

NoveList Reading Group Guide: (Continued)

paradoxes of time travel, both the skills and the ethical attitude are literally self-taught: an older Henry teaches nine-year-old Henry how to pick pockets, stage break-ins, and fight (p. 49). His carefree attitude as he accomplishes what he must is part of what so disturbs Gomez during the long night they spend together (pp. 137-46), leading Gomez to confront Clare with the danger he believes Henry represents.

That ethical carelessness shades over into other parts of Henry's life. He professes a carefully developed ethics of sharing information about the future—generally, he refuses to—but his sense of the future as determined allows him to break that rule readily when it is convenient to do so. He gives Gomez stock tips to prove his story and plays the lottery to allow him and Clare to buy a house; they support themselves over the years on the stock market, using information Henry gathers from older iterations of himself or brings back on his much more infrequent jaunts into the future. He uses the wrenching facts of the birth of Dr. Kendrick's first child, a son born with Down syndrome, to maneuver the doctor into taking Henry on as a patient.

Clare is forced to confront this side of Henry once, in the casual violence with which Henry retaliates at the high school boy who has assaulted her. She cannot reconcile the satisfaction Henry evidently takes from hurting Jason with her own certainty of Henry's essential goodness. The moment creates a moral crisis for her:

The look on Henry's face after he kicked Jason: utterly indifferent, as though he had just shaken his hand, as though he was thinking about nothing in particular, and then he was worried because he didn't know how I would react, and I realized that Henry enjoyed hurting Jason, and is that the same as Jason enjoying hurting me? But Henry is good. Does that make it okay? Is it okay that I wanted him to do it? (p. 102).

Clare doesn't pursue the thought, though, and she and Henry never speak of the incident. The question lingers, surfacing only occasionally. Clare is disturbed by Henry's exploitation of Dr. Kendrick's personal tragedy; she objects, though not for long and not very effectually, to Henry's winning the lottery to finance their house and she finds Henry's use of stock tips from the future "vaguely immoral" (p. 41). We never know whether Clare is unwilling to face Henry's darker side, or whether, protected by her essential naivety, she simply doesn't see it.

What is the symbolic importance of Clare's art in the novel?

On a personal level, Clare's art gives her a venue where she has the kind of control she cannot claim in her life outside the studio, which is necessarily governed by Henry's unpredictable comings and goings. At critical points in her life—facing Henry's imminent disappearance from her life for two full years, negotiating the transition to life as a couple, surviving her difficult pregnancies, contemplating life as a new mother, dealing with Henry's disability, and learning to live without Henry—Clare turns to her work. It is both a haven and a place to expose her emotional life. Henry's mother Annette, a singer, "could express her soul with [her] voice" (p. 238); Clare expresses her soul in her work. As a wife, even as a widow, she waits; as an artist, she creates a heartbreaking beauty.

Clare works with the same themes that drive Niffenegger's story, seeking to embody the dynamics of absence and presence, of love and longing. Her chosen medium is paper, which both evokes the delicate strength of her relationship with Henry and echoes Henry's own preoccupation, as a librarian, with books as physical objects. In fact, she meets Henry in real time because she comes to the Newberry Library to study the production of a particular book, an illustrated edition of *The Canterbury Tales*.

The first explicit mention of Clare's art comes during the dinner at which Clare meets Henry's father and Kimy, the woman who helped raise Henry after the death of his mother. Clare is working on a giant paper sculpture of a crow. Countering Clare's characterization of crows as "gorgeous," Kimy protests that they are bad luck (p. 237), foreshadowing Henry's characterization of absence as "a dark bird" that shadows those who remain (p. 520).

NoveList Reading Group Guide: (Continued)

Clare returns to the theme of birds and flight. The small sculptures she creates just after they are married remind Henry of airplanes or kites (p. 286), and she creates a sky full of birds on the walls of the bedroom. It is as she draws a tiny red bird enclosed in "a thicket of black lines" that Henry realizes she feels similarly trapped in the tiny room she uses as a studio, that she needs more physical and spiritual space in which to create (p. 286). The airplanes and birds express Clare's longing for open space.

Similarly, as she struggles with what should be her last pregnancy—the sixth child, conceived just before Henry gets his vasectomy—she draws a tiny heart at the center of an elaborate web of veins "that hold the small heart enmeshed like a fly in a spiderweb" (p. 375). Like the small red bird, the heart is entangled by its surroundings. The bird's thicket, though, is a trap that keeps it from soaring; the veins support the heart, sustain it. Clare wants to keep this baby with her, in this world, to trap the ethereal heartbeat that is the only sign of the baby within her. The act of creating the heart makes that transitory sound concrete, encapsulates the child for which she yearns, and for which she repeatedly risks her life. At the same time, the image of the fly in the spiderweb points to the impossibility of trapping life in this way and to the betrayal perpetrated by her body in repeatedly expelling these tiny lives. The web that should sustain has turned deadly.

The angel wings she makes for Henry after he loses his feet pull together a number of thematic elements. She has thought of Henry as "something like an angel;" at thirteen, Clare loves angels, thinking of them as beings that "have wings and fly around and sit on clouds" (p. 77). If Henry is an angel, he may be a dark angel, a demon, as Clare's grandmother believes. In any case, as Henry says, quoting from Rilke, "Every angel is terrifying" (p. 77). Clare has that quotation in mind as she begins to work on the wings: "Every angel is terrifying. And yet, alas, I invoke you, almost deadly birds of the soul" (p. 478). The wings, painted blood red, are for Henry "redolent of longing, of freedom, of rushing through space," echoing his futile dreams of running as he used to; they are also "darker than the darkness," with a threatening, ragged air (p. 484). The wings, then, bring together the seemingly opposing elements of this book: the transcendent love Henry and Clare share and the terrible power that continually threatens it.

The final work of art in the novel is the constellation Clare makes of herself when she first returns to her studio nearly two years after Henry's death. Making herself into a "glass vessel," "a network of tiny lights," Clare reflects her own sense of insubstantiality in Henry's absence (p. 533, 534). Henry has, after all, given her entire life shape and weight; she can remember no time without him and so cannot imagine her life without his presence, actual or imminent. She feels herself vanishing, weightless, without him to hold her down, until the portrait is more real, more present, than she: "I place my finger on her forehead and say, 'Vanish,' but it is she who will stay' I am the one who is vanishing" (p. 534). Henry has always been present in her life, even in his absence. With his death, she is absent from her own life; she is as insubstantial, as roughly sketched, as far removed, as the constellations.

The title of this novel suggests that it is Clare's story; is it, really?

Calling the novel *The Time Traveler's Wife* suggests that the book will tell Clare's story, even as it suggests something about Henry. At the end, though, it is difficult to say what we know about Clare herself outside of her relationship with Henry. Clare's childhood is shaped completely around Henry's time traveling, though her fear that her mother will commit suicide betrays the existence of another story, one neither Henry nor the reader is ever fully privy to, because Henry is not present for it. Even her struggle to have a child is, finally, resolved both emotionally and physically by Henry's time traveling. When Henry dies, she sinks into a paralyzing depression punctuated by a stifled resentment that Alba visits Henry while she cannot. Though we see her first faltering steps out of depression, the novel is mostly silent about what Clare does, how she survives and then learns

NoveList Reading Group Guide: (Continued)

to live, in the forty-seven years between Henry's death and his final visit to her. This is not, strictly speaking, Clare's story, unless we see Clare's story as limited to the definition of her as Henry's wife. The novel gives us little reason to see her as anything beyond that.

That reality is reflected in the space given to Henry and to Clare in the pages of the novel. Large swatches of the book deal with Henry's life before he meets Clare and with his travels away from her. Even when Clare is present in the story being told, more than half is told in Henry's voice, from his perspective. If Clare is not precisely passive—she does take control of the relationship at important junctures, usually to drive things in the direction she knows they are meant to go—the narrative force of the novel does not lie in her patient acceptance or in the sure knowledge of her destiny imparted to her by Henry. It is Henry's accelerating crisis that drives the story to its conclusion.

Clare does shape the story in important ways, though. In fact, Clare gets both the first and last word, framing Henry's story with her own. "It's hard being left behind," she begins (p. vii). The final sentences of the novel, over five hundred pages later, seem to complete the thought: "But I have no choice. He is coming, and I am here" (p. 536). She has waited for Henry through five hundred pages, an entire life, and she continues to wait, trapped in his discontinuity. Clare waits because she must, because Henry travels. Whatever Henry may do in all of the pages and all of the years that intervene between Clare's first statement and her last is framed and filtered by Clare's waiting.

Further Reading:

Charles Dickinson, *A Shortcut in Time* (2003)

Euclid, Illinois, is linked by a web of irregular paths that provide shortcuts across the town. Jack Winkler discovers that one of those paths also transports him fifteen minutes back in time. Jack's feat provokes wonder in the town and prepares him to accept the story of a strange woman who appears in the town square claiming to be living in 1908. Jack's struggle to help her becomes entangled in his own personal tragedy and that of his brother, who is brain-damaged as the result of a childhood accident. An engaging meditation on grief, remorse, and the countless ways in which past and present are inescapably intertwined.

Ken Grimwood, *Replay* (1986)

What if you could do it all over again? Jeff Winston gets that chance, dying at age forty-three, only to awaken—again and again—in his college dorm room as an eighteen-year-old college student. Each time, he retains his memories intact, allowing him to correct mistakes and take missed opportunities. He shares his gift (or is it a curse?) with Pamela, a woman who dies just nine minutes after him and who shares each of his lives with him.

Alice Sebold, *The Lovely Bones* (2002)

A strange coming-of-age story whose protagonist is already dead. Fourteen-year-old Susie Salmon is raped and murdered on her way home from school one day; she watches from heaven as her family grieves and a detective with his own troubles investigates her case. In the end, Sebold's novel is about those left behind, about memory and grief, and the need to continue.

Kurt Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969)

High school students read Vonnegut's classic novel for its investigation of the horrors of the modern world, but

NoveList Reading Group Guide: (Continued)

its protagonist, Billy Pilgrim, is the original "chronologically displaced person." Billy comes "unstuck in time" and visits various moments in his life—most famously the firebombing of Dresden during World War II—repeatedly and out of order. Where Niffenegger's time travel story turns inward, examining the workings of the human heart, Vonnegut is interested in the workings of history, making for a book that is both wider ranging and more brutal in its perspective.

Mark Winegardner, *Crooked River Burning* (2000)

A classic tale of star-crossed lovers kept apart by social, economic, and emotional obstacles, and an engaging history of Winegardner's hometown, Cleveland. David Zielinsky is from a working-class ethnic neighborhood; Anne O'Connor's family is rich and powerful. Anne and David fall in love as adolescents, but it takes them twenty years to work around to marrying each other. In the interim, David marries someone else, raises children, and builds a career in local politics, while Anne becomes a rising star in journalism. Their full lives and enduring love become a prism through which Winegardner explores the secrets of the city he loves.

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This Book Discussion Guide was developed by MaryAnne M. Gobble, who has a PhD in Comparative Literature from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. She is a freelance writer living and working in Durham, North Carolina.

Book: The Time Traveler's Wife

Random House Discussion Questions:

1. In *The Time Traveler's Wife*, the characters meet each other at various times during their lifetime. How does the author keep all the timelines in order and on time?

2. Although Henry does the time traveling, Clare is equally impacted. How does she cope with his journeys and does she ultimately accept them?

3. How does the writer introduce the reader to the concept of time travel as a realistic occurrence? Does she succeed?

4. Henry's life is disrupted on multiple levels by spontaneous time travel. How does his career as a librarian offset his tumultuous disappearances? Why does that job appeal to Henry?

5. Henry and Clare know each other for years before they fall in love as adults. How does Clare cope with the knowledge that at a young age she knows that Henry is the man she will eventually marry?

6. *The Time Traveler's Wife* is ultimately an enduring love story. What trials and tribulations do Henry and Clare face that are the same as or different from other "normal" relationships?

7. How does their desire for a child affect their relationship?

8. The book is told from both Henry and Clare's perspectives. What does this add to the story?

9. Do you think the ending of the novel is satisfactory?

10. Though history there have been dozens of mediums used for time travel in literature. Please site examples and compare *The Time Traveler's Wife* to the ones with which you are familiar.

Reviews:

Booklist Review: On the surface, Henry and Clare Detamble are a normal couple living in Chicago's Lincoln Park neighborhood. Henry works at the Newberry Library and Clare creates abstract paper art, but the cruel reality is that Henry is a prisoner of time. It sweeps him back and forth at its leisure, from the present to the past, with no regard for where he is or what he is doing. It drops him naked and vulnerable into another decade, wearing an age-appropriate face. In fact, it's not unusual for Henry to run into the other Henry and help him out of a jam. Sound unusual? Imagine Clare Detamble's astonishment at seeing Henry dropped stark naked into her parents' meadow when she was only six. Though, of course, until she came of age, Henry was always the perfect gentleman and gave young Clare nothing but his friendship as he dropped in and out of her life. It's no wonder that the film rights to this hip and urban love story have been acquired.

— Elsa Gaztambide (*Booklist,* September 1, 2003, p59)

Publishers Weekly Review: /* Starred Review */ This highly original first novel won the largest advance San Francisco-based MacAdam/Cage had ever paid, and it was money well spent. Niffenegger has written a soaring love story illuminated by dozens of finely observed details and scenes, and one that skates nimbly around a huge conundrum at the heart of the book: Henry De Tamble, a rather dashing librarian at the famous Newberry Library in Chicago, finds himself unavoidably whisked around in time. He disappears from a scene in, say, 1998 to find himself suddenly, usually without his clothes, which mysteriously disappear in transit, at an entirely different place 10 years earlier—or later. During one of these migrations, he drops in on beautiful teenage Clare Abshire, an heiress in a large house on the nearby Michigan peninsula, and a lifelong passion is born. The problem is that while Henry's age darts back and forth according to his location in time, Clare's moves forward in the normal manner, so the pair are often out of sync. But such is the author's tenderness with the characters, and the determinedly ungimmicky way in which she writes of their predicament (only once do they make use of Henry's foreknowledge of events to make money, and then it seems to Clare like cheating) that the book is much more love story than fantasy. It also has a splendidly drawn cast, from Henry's violinist father, ruined by the loss of his wife in an accident from which Henry time-traveled as a child, to Clare's odd family and a multitude of Chicago bohemian friends. The couple's daughter, Alba, inherits her father's strange abilities, but this is again handled with a light touch; there's no Disney cuteness here. Henry's foreordained end is agonizing, but Niffenegger has another card up her sleeve, and plays it with poignant grace. It is a fair tribute to her skill and sensibility to say that the book leaves a reader with an impression of life's riches and strangeness rather than of easy thrills. (Sept. 9)

Staff (Reviewed August 4, 2003) (*Publishers Weekly,* vol 250, issue 31, p55)

Library Journal Review: /* Starred Review */ This debut novel tells the compelling love story of artist Clare and her husband, Henry, a librarian at the Newberry Library who has an ailment called Chrono-Displaced Person (CDP), which without his control removes him to the past or the future under stressful circumstances. The clever story is told from the perspectives of Henry and Clare at various times in their lives. Henry's time travels enable him to visit Clare as a little girl and later as an aged widow and explain "how it feels to be living outside of the time constraints most humans are subject to." He seeks out a doctor named Kendrik, who is unable to help him but hopes to find a cure for his daughter, Alba, who has inherited CDP. The lengthy but exciting narrative concludes tragically with Henry's foretold death during one of his time travels but happily shows the timelessness of genuine love. The whole is skillfully written with a blend of distinct characters and heartfelt emotions that hopscotch through time, begging interpretation on many levels. Public libraries should plan on purchasing multiple

Reviews: (Continued)

copies of this highly recommended book. David A. Beron, Univ. of New Hampshire, Durham (Reviewed August 15, 2003) (*Library Journal,* vol 128, issue 13, p134)

Kirkus Reviews: Mainstreamed time-travel romance, cleverly executed and tastefully furnished if occasionally overwrought: a first from fine newcomer Niffenegger.

While the many iterations and loops here are intricately woven, the plot, proper, is fairly simple. Henry has a genetic condition that causes him to time-travel. The trips, triggered by stress, are unpredictable, and his destination is usually connected to an important event in his life, like his mother's death. Between the ages of 6 and 18, Clare, rich, talented, and beautiful, is repeatedly visited by time-traveling Henry, in his 30s and 40s; they're in love, and lovers, when the visits end. In Chicago, now 20, Clare spots Henry, who, at 28, has never seen her before; she explains, and they begin their contemporaneous life together, which continues until Henry dies at 43. (Clare receives one more visit in her 80s, in a moving final scene.) Henry is presented as dangerous and constantly in danger, but—until his grisly and upsetting final days—those episodes seem incidental, in part because everything is a foregone conclusion, paradox having been dismissed from the start. There's a great deal of such incident; the story could be cut by a third without losing substance. Teenaged Clare is roughly treated on a date; adult Henry beats up the lout. Clare and Henry want to be parents; after a series of heartbreaking miscarriages they have a perfect, time-traveling child. Will Henry's secret be discovered? Henry reveals it himself. Presented as a literary novel, this is more accurately an exceedingly literate one, distinguished by the nearly constant background thrum of connoisseurship. Henry works as a rare-books librarian and recites Rilke; Clare is an avant-sculptress and papermaker; they appreciate the best of punk rock, opera, and Chicago, live in a beautiful house, and have better sex than you.

A *Love Story* for educated, upper-middle-class tastes; with a movie sale to Brad Pitt and Jennifer Aniston, it could have some of that long-ago book's commercial potential, too.

(*Kirkus* Reviews, August 1, 2003)

BookPage Reviews, 2003 September

Website: http://www.bookpage.com

Coping with a Disappearing Husband

About halfway through Audrey Niffenegger's debut novel, *The Time Traveler's Wife*, you realize you're going to be devastated. You love the characters, you're deeply involved in their lives, you can sense tragedy coming and you know it's going to hurt. But there's no way you can stop reading.

And that's exactly as it should be. The novel is all about unstoppable fate, inevitable heartbreak and how to keep trudging happily along when you know your path leads to despair. It's the story of a couple, Henry and Clare, told in alternating segments by each of them. And though it's about time travel, the book is more literary romance than science fiction. Henry is a 28-year-old librarian who has a genetic disorder that causes him to travel through time involuntarily. Stacking books on the shelves in the library's inner sanctum, he'll suddenly vanish, leaving behind a pile of clothes, only to materialize in some unknown past or future moment, naked and nauseated. Often he travels to a certain Michigan meadow and visits a little girl—Clare—who sneaks him food and clothes.

Reviews: (Continued)

So when Clare and Henry meet in "real time," October 1991, Clare has known him since she was 6. But Henry, now 28, doesn't recognize her, because he didn't start time traveling to Clare's meadow until he was older. Henry, for his part, has been time-traveling long enough to understand that certain events are bound to happen, no matter what.

If that sounds complicated, don't worry. Niffenegger structures the novel clearly enough that the timelines never get tangled, and her writing is so strong you'd keep going even if you did get confused. She's hip without being shallow. Her characters talk about punk rock and Rilke with equal enthusiasm, and their note-perfect dialogue is at once cool and clever, poetic and realistic. You like them and you want to save them from pain, but all you can do—like Henry, like anyone—is enjoy the story and try not to think about the inevitable end.

Becky Ohlsen writes from Portland, Oregon.